

# Arts Visibility

Daniel Sonenberg

**1. Describe the project that your grant request would support and explain how the funding will increase the visibility of that project.**

I am applying for an Arts Visibility Grant in order to help create a promotional packet for *The Summer King*, an opera that I recently completed while in residence at the Yaddo artist colony. The packet will allow me to present the work to opera producers and companies in the hopes of securing a staged performance of the piece. The funding from the Visibility Grant would be applied toward making an audio recording of a section of the opera during the summer of 2012.

Here is some general background about the opera: *The Summer King* documents the life and considers the legacy of the Negro League baseball player Josh Gibson. A hulking catcher, Gibson's prodigious talent with a bat earned him the moniker "the black Babe Ruth," and secured him a spot as the second Negro league ballplayer ever inducted into the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame (the first never to have played in the white Majors). Tragically, Gibson died three months before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. The opera portrays the injustice Gibson suffered at the hands of baseball's "Gentlemen's Agreement," which all but officially barred black players from big league baseball; and also the thriving culture – characterized by black-owned teams, stadiums and taverns, nightlife and humor – that was created and supported by organized black baseball. Ultimately, the opera addresses the legacy of Gibson, who never truly fought for integration, and was too ill, both physically and mentally, to participate in it when it came.

While Gibson may not have been a force for social revolution, his exploits on the field, and his tireless submission to the grueling Negro league lifestyle, were signally important in generating the momentum that wrought the demise of segregated ball. Like Moses, he brought his people to the Promised Land, but wasn't allowed to step upon the hallowed soil. Funds from a Visibility Grant would go towards hiring a recording technician and instrumental musicians to create a professional audio recording of one of the most central and ambitious scenes from the opera (Act II Scene 1, which takes place in Mexico). The version of the scene I would record is scored for piano, singers, and mariachi band (2 trumpets, 2 violins, double bass, acoustic guitar). Singers and a pianist for the recording project will be funded by other sources (either a USM Faculty Senate Research Grant, for which I am applying, or out of pocket).

Unlike a novel, the score of an opera does not adequately speak for itself. While certain expert readers may gather some sense of an opera's viability and promise by flipping through its many pages, the music can only truly come to life for prospective producers and companies with the aid of a first-rate audio recording. The importance of presenting this opera – which I have labored on for over eight years – in its best light in order to demonstrate its potential on the stage and assure it a life beyond the page cannot be overstated. I currently have no demo recordings with elaborate instrumentation, and this recording would constitute a major advance in my ability to market the opera.

**2. Identify the target audience for your project and the specific marketing plan you will use to reach this audience.**

My immediate target audience is opera producers and opera companies, including colleges (where it is conceivable a first run of my opera may take place). I plan to assemble a marketing package that includes press clippings about the opera; a printout of the synopsis, overview, and libretto; biographical information about myself, and a 25-minute selection of music (both score *and* recording) from the opera that represents the best demonstration of the work I have at my disposal. In most cases, the recipients of these packages will be approached through channels (companies or individuals who have already done work with my opera-in-development, or have expressed interest in its progress). Individuals in this category include Ned Canty (director, Memphis Opera), Charles Jarden (director, American Opera Projects), Kenneth Overton (director, Opera Noir), Elizabeth Scott (Chief Media and Digital Officer, Lincoln Center, formerly Vice President at Major League Baseball), and Steve Osgood (Assistant Conductor, The Metropolitan Opera).

The ultimate target audience for my opera, of course, is much wider. My goal is to attain a production in a prestigious venue and gain considerable exposure for my opera and myself. I hope to appeal not only to the standard audiences of opera and contemporary music, but also to those interested in the important history of segregation in sports and in general in our society.

**3. Demonstrate your ability or capacity to complete your proposed project by either evidencing similar past projects, or by providing brief action steps for the completion of the one you are now proposing.**

I have indeed completed projects similar to this in the recent past. In the summer of 2011, I recorded a scene of the opera using advanced student performers at the University of Southern Maine, and our own professional-quality recording facilities there. The project was a success, but I would like, for this next recording, to employ only professional performers, with the exception of several choral parts that will be performed by members of USM's elite vocal ensemble, the Chamber Singers. As the director of USM's acoustic recording facility, I have access to the equipment and space I will need to complete my project. I have also organized and supervised previous recording sessions for other scenes of the opera at the Manhattan School of Music and the City College of New York, using professional musicians (some excerpts are included with my application).

As a composer, I have recently received honors and awards including a residency from the Corporation of Yaddo (November 2011), a Maine Arts Commission Good Ideas Grant (December 2011), a Meet The Composer Grant (October, 2010), and the role of Composer in Residence at the 2010 Portland Chamber Music Festival. Scenes from this opera were performed in Maine in March 2007, and received extensive local press coverage. In September 2007, a performance in New York was covered in a back-page feature article in the Wall Street Journal (my cv contains a weblink to this article). Both the work's potential marketability, and my ability to supervise demo recordings, are well documented.

**4. If applicable, provide evidence of the use of Maine vendors.**

The musicians and recording technician I plan to hire with support of a Visibility Grant are all Maine residents. They include Jennifer Elowitch, violin; Robert Lehman, violin; Alan Kaschub, trumpet; Betty Rines, trumpet; Don Pride, guitar; Bronek Suchanek, bass, and Katie Gilcrest, recording technician.